

## The Brainstorm Process

*Introduction to Game Design LiveLessons*

Colleen Macklin and John Sharp

Brainstorming is a design methodology used to generate ideas. The term was coined by Alex Faickney Osborn in the 1953 book *Applied Imagination*. It can be done individually or in groups.

We have based the following brainstorming exercise on Osborn's methods as well as ones we have learned from other design companies and in our own creative work.

### Brainstorming Rules

1. *Quantity Over Quality* - the more ideas you can capture, the more you will have to work with.
2. *No Judging* - We're going to quantity here, so the last thing we want is to start limiting your ideas. Every idea is a good idea in the brainstorm process. Let them free!
3. *Go Wild* - speaking of letting them free, let them be wild too. It is much easier to bring a very out there idea back to reality than it is to try to inject fun and creativity into a more predictable idea.
4. *Get Visual* - sketching your ideas can convey much more on a single post-it note than some words can.
5. *No Buts (just Ands)* - add on to each others ideas (or your own), don't try to say something like "but this idea won't work because..."
6. *Combine Ideas* - Just like saying and, feel free to merge, mash, and splice ideas to generate new ones. Ultimately the results of the brainstorm will likely be a combination of individual ideas.

### Preparing for a brainstorm

You'll want to get several things ready before you start brainstorming:

1. Post-It notes
2. Sharpie markers
3. Index cards (optional)
4. White board or large paper (optional)

### Conceptual Brainstorm

A conceptual brainstorm is a way to generate a lot of ideas for your game. To begin, you will want to start with a question to help frame your brainstorm. Here again, we are looking for helpful constraints.

We suggest starting your question off with "How might we..." So, if your design values include creating a 2-player competitive game based on Ping Pong, with high strategy for an arcade platform, you would form your question something like this: "How might we create a 2-player competitive game based on Ping Pong, with high strategy for an arcade platform?"

The "How might we..." question gives you something to hold on to during the brainstorm. but there's more to help guide you, and that's brainstorming rules. Here's a selection based on

### **Design Values Brainstorm**

If you are starting with a blank slate, you should start here to identify some of the constraints around what you are making. constraints are the designer's best friend! To do a design values brainstorm, begin by writing down ideas for each of these questions:

Who is playing?  
Where are they playing?  
When are they playing?  
What are they doing?  
What's the point of view? How do they see and hear it?  
Is the game Competitive? Cooperative? Both?  
How do players make decisions? In real-time or by turns?  
Where does the challenge come from?  
What is the mix of chance and strategy?  
What's the theme?  
What are some adjectives around how the game will feel?

Write as many ideas as you have for each of these questions, one idea on one Post-It. Give yourself time to freely think about them.

When you have finished answering each one, begin the process of narrowing in on one answer for each. From here, you should have a pretty good descriptor of your game, and we would suggest moving onto the next step, a conceptual brainstorm.

### **Noun / Verb / Adjective Brainstorm**

Another way to prompt a brainstorm is to come up with the nouns, verbs and adjectives possible in your game. Once you have a set of ideas for your game, break them out into nouns, verbs and adjectives. Begin by writing each on one post-it.

Start with verbs: what do you get to do in this game? Verbs are the core of a game experience, because playing games is all about doing things - it's about action.

Move on to the nouns in your game idea: given those actions, what are the objects and spaces that enable players to perform those actions?

And then finally to adjectives: what are the descriptives for the play quality? How does the game make you feel?

With a table full of post-its created to breakdown your game, look at your adjectives, and pick three you would like to have in the game you are creating. Then pick three verbs you think will create those feelings/experiences. Finally, pick three nouns that will enable those actions and would create those emotions/experiences.

With these displayed in front of you, begin a brainstorming session incorporating each of the nouns, verbs and adjectives into your game concepts.

### **Brainstorming pointers**

#### *One idea per Post-It*

This will help you keep ideas simple, and will let you organize them into clusters later.

#### *Set a time limit*

Give yourself a set amount of time for your brainstorm and then give yourself time afterwards to organize the results.

#### *Discuss them*

Once you are done with your initial brainstorming, talk amongst your team. This will help build consensus about a direction or two to pursue in prototype form.

#### *Cluster them*

When the brainstorm is over, cluster related ideas into groups, and feel free to add more ideas as they come to you.

#### *Vote for Consensus*

To hone in on a few to begin prototyping, vote on the post its after they have been discussed. To vote, each team member has 5 votes to distribute among the post-its. They can even put all 5 of their votes on one, if they really like that idea.

#### *Silent Storm*

If you are alone, you will likely brainstorm silently... but when you are in a group, we think the silent brainstorm is a great way to get a lot of ideas on the table first, and then discuss them later. It avoids “group-think”, allowing for a very diverse set of ideas to build on. To conduct a silent brainstorm, set a timer for 10-15 minutes. Give everyone a stack of post-its, and compete to fill out the most post its with ideas. Once the timer is done, lay them out and take turns describing them.